



THE CINCINNATI REGENTS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

From Peachtree to Tobacco Road to the Ohio. Two crowns won, a third still chased.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Things We Carry

A baseball franchise does not die. It migrates.

It carries its ghosts in equipment trunks and whispers through batting cages a thousand miles away. That is this franchise's whole story. They answer to Cincinnati now — a crown and a lion on the crest, the navy and gold of a house that calls itself the Regents — but the blood runs back through the tobacco road of Durham and all the way to Peachtree, to a ballpark in Atlanta where a team called the Smashers once played baseball that could make a whole city hum.

The franchise was a charter member of The Big League in the winter of 2000, one of the thirty-two clubs that opened a book with all its pages still blank. And in the very first chapters it wrote something most franchises never get to write: it won. Not once but twice, back to back, in 2002 and 2003 — two crowns that helped define a young league and set the early standard for what greatness looked like.

Then it spent the next quarter-century chasing the feeling, across three cities and two relocations, through a fire sale and a generation of fourth-place finishes. From Atlanta to Durham to the banks of the Ohio River, the people who love this club have carried the same ache and the same faith: that a franchise which once knew how to win might remember how again.

This is the story of a club that touched the summit before it had a history at all — and of the long, winding road back toward it. Two crowns won. A third still chased. And a new name, royal and hopeful, carrying everything that came before.

This is the story of the things we carry.

I

The Founding and the Back-to-Back

2001 – 2003

The Big League began the way an empire begins — everywhere at once, every club brand new, every roster drawn from the same common pool, no dynasties yet and no ghosts. What a franchise would become was, that first spring, entirely a matter of what it chose to do with an empty page.

The Atlanta Smashers chose to win immediately.

Under a general manager named **Jason** — a builder with a scout's eye and a poet's patience — the Smashers won ninety games in their inaugural 2001 season and marched straight into October in Year One. His clubs were everything baseball is supposed to be: fearless, flawed, loud in the right places. They could hit, they could pitch, and they played like they understood what the postseason was for.

At the heart of it stood a third baseman named **Diego Orta**, and to understand those early Smashers you must understand Orta. He had wrists like steel cable and a swing that sounded like a closing door — a hitter who made pitchers flinch and teammates believe. In that first season he hit thirty-one home runs, drove in 87, and was worth better than 7 wins all by himself. He was the heartbeat, and he would remain the heartbeat for a decade.

Then came the years that built the legend. In **2002** the Smashers won ninety-seven games and their first division title; in **2003** they won a hundred and two — still the most in franchise history — and ran away with the division again. And in both of those autumns, they finished the climb. **Back-to-back champions of The Big League, 2002 and 2003** — over the Oahu Paddlers, and then over the San Antonio Chiles Picantes, now the Myrtle Beach Mermen. Jason was named General Manager of the Year in 2002, a nod from peers who understood exactly how hard that balancing act really was.

Orta was magnificent across the run — twenty-seven homers and ninety RBI in the first title year, then a career-defining 2003 of thirty-three home runs, ninety-six RBI, and a staggering 9.5-WAR season, one of the finest individual campaigns the franchise has ever produced. On the mound the original ace **Sean McEntee** went 15–10 in the championship summer of 2002, the quiet workhorse behind the swagger. Those Smashers were a mixtape of belief and spare parts — and for two golden years, every track landed.

The franchise had not waited for an identity. It had built one, and crowned it twice, before most clubs had hung their first banner. Those two crowns would have to last a very long time.

II

The Long Afternoon

2004 – 2007

Success ages fast.

The Smashers did not fall off a cliff after 2003 — that was the cruel, slow beauty of it. They kept winning. They won ninety-three games in 2004, 94 in 2005, 93 again in 2006, reaching the postseason all three years. But the division kept slipping out of reach, and each October ended a little earlier than the last. It was a long, warm afternoon of a decline, the kind you don't notice until the shadows are already long.

Orta stayed the constant — twenty-eight homers in 2004, a 117-RBI season in 2006 — but around him the roster was quietly turning over, and a new generation was arriving to carry the load. A right-hander named **Francisco Fonseca** became the rotation's workhorse, a model of dependability who won fifteen games in 2005, 15 more in 2006, and anchored the staff with four straight seasons of frontline innings. And a young right fielder named **Chad Keyes** began to find his power, climbing from twenty-seven home runs to 42 by 2006 — a slugger coming into his prime at exactly the wrong moment for a team starting to age around him.

By 2007 the arms were creaking and the songs had slowed. The Smashers finished 80–82, their first losing season, fifth in the division — the dynasty closing like a great novel, satisfying and inevitable and a little sad. That winter Jason left, the architect stepping out of his own shadow, his work already done. He had given Atlanta two crowns and seven straight competitive summers. No one knew it yet, but those would be the last October games the franchise would play for a very long time.

III

The Fire Sale

2008 – 2010

Every franchise has its reckoning. Atlanta's arrived in the form of a new general manager named **Sean** — a man of ambition and a short fuse, whose tenure would be remembered less for what he won than for what he gave away.

His 2008 roster was talented but brittle, and it sank to 77–85. The next year offered one last, deceptive flicker of life: the **2009 Smashers won ninety games and reached the postseason**, with Fonseca going 15–9 and a homegrown ace finally announcing himself in full. But beneath the box scores, the foundation was already rotting — and Sean spent that summer and the ones around it pulling out the load-bearing walls.

First he sent **Chad Keyes**, the last pillar of the championship core, out of town. Keyes would go on to a 452-home-run career and become one of the league's premier sluggers in another uniform — the precise kind of departure a fan base never quite forgives. Then came the defining mistake. **Doug Morris** — Atlanta's ace, a homegrown success story who had just gone an otherworldly **18–1 with a 2.09 ERA and two hundred and twenty strikeouts in 2009** — was dealt away. One year later, Morris would win the Fire Conference Pitcher of the Year award for his new club, the kind of punctuation mark that follows a front-office error you can never quite forget.

The bill came due in 2010: **63–99**, the bottom falling out, the great run finally and fully over. Two top assets gone, a fractured fan base, a roster left in shambles. Sean departed the league quietly, leaving behind a teardown he never meant to make and a successor to pick up the pieces.

IV

The Move

2011 – 2019

GM Myf arrived with the quiet realism of someone who knew exactly what she was inheriting. The 2011 Smashers were a memory of what used to be — a thin farm, a tired payroll, a roster stitched together with tape. Diego Orta played his final season that year, the last living link to the championships, and walked away a future Hall of Famer with 239 home runs and 851 RBI in franchise colors. When he left, the Atlanta era left with him.

Three seasons later, the moving vans came for the first time.

The franchise pulled up its roots, left Georgia for North Carolina, and the **Durham Dragons were born** in 2014 — a new ballpark, a new crowd, a new name, and a new promise that this time would be different.

It wasn't, not really. The Dragons learned how to compete but never quite how to win. Myf's best club came in **2016 — an 84–78 outfit that clawed to fourth place**, the high-water mark of her tenure and, it turned out, the most wins the franchise would manage in its entire Carolina existence. There were flashes worth remembering. A right-hander named **Troy Kelso** pitched through pain and gave Durham its one genuine front-of-the-rotation arm, peaking with a brilliant 13–9, 2.50-ERA, 6-WAR season in 2015 before — in the franchise's oldest and saddest tradition — moving on to become a star elsewhere. Young hitters fought uphill. The climb never got easier.

And somewhere in that frustration, something uniquely North Carolinian took root: a rivalry with the **Winston-Salem Camels**, another proud, beaten-down franchise across the state. The games meant little in the standings and everything to the towns. They played for bragging rights, for the locals, for the stubborn joy of proving North Carolina still mattered — two have-nots turning their shared exile into something that felt, on the right night, like it counted.

When Myf stepped down in 2019, she left behind discipline and decency but no trophies — a rebuild that refused to blossom, respectable baseball in a neighborhood that only ever rewarded brilliance.

V

Still Searching

2020 – 2029

GM Charles took over in 2020 with a blueprint and no illusions. The job, as he saw it, was not about banners — it was about pulse. So he tore it down again, piece by piece, determined to give the Dragons a foundation instead of a facelift.

That first spring, a second baseman named **Vic Perez** showed up with a bat that carried its own forecast. His breakout — **thirty-six home runs, ninety-eight RBI, a 6.4-WAR season in 2020** — gave the club a real middle-of-the-order hum for the first time in years. The wins didn't follow yet, but the sound in the cage was different: sharper, hungrier.

The standings, though, kept their grim patience. The Dragons lost ninety-eight in 2021 and 100 in 2023 — the worst record in franchise history — the kind of seasons that test whether a teardown is a plan or just a fall. A run-producing infielder named **David Betancur** gave the lineup some thump, but the help came slowly, and October stayed a rumor. By the late 2020s the rebuild had become the longest in the franchise's life, and the question hanging over Durham was no longer *when* but *whether*.

And then, faintly, the forecast began to change. A shortstop named **Jim Leach** — owner of the lightest hands in the league — arrived to steady the infield, posting a 5-WAR season in 2025. Young arms like **Miguel Zamora**, who went 13–7 with a 3.05 ERA in 2029, started to give the rotation a spine. And in 2029 a left fielder named **Juan Martinez** delivered the loudest summer the franchise had heard in two decades: **forty-two home runs, a hundred and sixteen RBI, a .295 average, and a 5.4-WAR campaign** — the kind of season that doesn't fix a rebuild but finally gives it a face.

The won-loss column hadn't fully turned — 80–82 in 2029, still under water, still no October. But for the first time since the moving vans, the cage in Durham sounded like a team going somewhere. And as it happened, the franchise was about to go somewhere too.

VI

The Ache

There is one thing to say before the next chapter begins, and it may be the truest thing of all.

For twenty-nine seasons, across two cities and a thousand miles, the people who love this franchise carried the same ache. In Atlanta they tasted the summit early — two parades, a decade of contenders, a

Hall of Famer in the three-hole — and then watched the front office trade the future away one star at a time. In Durham the ache was different: sharper, quieter, hungrier. The Carolina fans **never saw a playoff game**. They never knew what October baseball felt like when it was *theirs*. In sixteen seasons by the tobacco road, the Dragons did not play a single postseason inning.

And still the seats filled. Still the caps and the stories passed down from parent to child. Still the city showed up, season after losing season, on the faith that this franchise once knew how to win and might remember how again.

That is the thing that has migrated, twice now, from Peachtree to the Piedmont and beyond. Not the trophies — those stayed in 2003. What travels in the equipment trunks is the *memory* of winning, and the refusal to let it go. The ghosts of two cities ride along together now, north and west, toward a river and a crown.

VII

A New Crown to Chase

2030 – 2031

And so, once more, the moving vans came.

Before the 2030 season the franchise crossed the Ohio River and came to rest in Cincinnati — and in doing so it reached, at last, for a name worthy of the only thing it has ever truly had: those two early crowns. They are the **Regents** now. A lion on the crest, a crown above it, navy and gold and a slash of crimson — the heraldry of a house that remembers it was once royalty, and intends to be again.

It is, on its face, the boldest kind of rebranding a long-suffering franchise can attempt: to name yourself for kings before you have earned the throne back. But there is a logic to it that runs straight through this whole history. This is a franchise that *was* crowned, twice, when the league was young — that knows the weight of a championship in a way most clubs never will, and has spent a quarter-century unable to forget it. The Regents are not pretending at royalty. They are reclaiming a birthright.

They arrived in Cincinnati carrying everything the trunks would hold: Diego Orta's Hall of Fame bat and the banners of 2002 and 2003; the long penance of the fire sale; sixteen Carolina summers that taught a fan base how to wait; and a young core just beginning to make a sound.

Then they played, and the sound was better than anyone had a right to expect.

The 2030 Regents won **eighty-six games** — the most this franchise had won since 2009, when it was still in Atlanta and Diego Orta was still in the lineup. Sixteen years of Carolina baseball had never produced a summer that good; Durham's best was eighty-four wins, once, in 2016. Cincinnati beat it in its first try. **Juan Martinez**, whose thunder the club had been promising for years, won a Silver Slugger. So did **Eric Chini**. **Eli Bernal** won a Gold Glove. The crown, it turned out, had been placed on a team that could actually play.

The 2031 season brought **eighty-two wins and a fourth-place finish**, a step sideways rather than back, with Chini taking a second straight Silver Slugger. No October — the franchise's postseason drought now runs to twenty-two years, back to 2009 — but two consecutive winning-adjacent seasons after sixteen years of almost nothing is not a small thing, and the difference between eighty-two wins and a wild card is a good winter, not a decade.

Two crowns won. A third still chased. From Peachtree to Tobacco Road to the banks of the Ohio, the franchise rows on toward the far shore — and the people, as they always have, keep coming.

The river remembers. So does the crown.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League — as the Atlanta Smashers)

Relocations: Atlanta → Durham (2014, renamed the Dragons); Durham → Cincinnati (2030, renamed the Regents)

Current identity: Cincinnati Regents

Home: Regent Park, Cincinnati — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Jade Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,435–2,588 (.485)

Postseason appearances: 7 (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009)

League Championships: 2 (2002, 2003)

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2002 (won over the Oahu Paddlers), 2003 (won over the San Antonio Chiles Picantes, now Myrtle Beach Mermen)

Division titles: 3 (2002, 2003, 2009)

Best season: 2003 (102–60, .630)

Worst season: 2023 (62–100)

Most Valuable Players: 0

Cy Young Awards: 0

Rookies of the Year: 0

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own — Diego Orta (2017), all 1,444 of his games with this franchise. Jeremy McMartin (2020) gave it 760 games, 42% of his career, before Denver; Omar Gonzalez (2012) played 100.

General managers: Jason L (2001–2007), Sean S (2008–2010), Myf N (2011–2019), Charles S (2020–2023), Terry B (2025), Dylan W (2026–2027), Chris B (2028–)

Atlanta era (2001–2013): 1,085–1,021 (.515) — 7 postseason berths, 2 championships

Durham era (2014–2029): 1,182–1,410 (.456) — 0 postseason berths

Cincinnati era (2030–): 168–157 (.517) — 0 postseason berths so far

Best Durham season: 2016 (84–78)

Best Cincinnati season: 2030 (86–76)

Postseason drought: since 2009

Pillars of the Franchise

Diego Orta, 3B (2001–2011) — The franchise's lone Hall of Famer and the heartbeat of the championship Smashers. The cornerstone of the 2002 and 2003 titles, with a monster 9.5-WAR season in 2003. Retired in Atlanta colors with 239 home runs, 851 RBI, and roughly 57 WAR — the face the franchise has spent twenty years trying to replace.

Francisco Fonseca, RHP (2004–2010) — The quiet workhorse of the post-title years. Anchored the rotation with 92 wins, a 3.32 ERA, and four straight frontline seasons, including an 18–13 campaign in 2008. The dependable heart of the staff while the dynasty aged around him.

Sean McEntee, RHP (2001–2003) — The original ace. Won 39 games across the franchise's first three seasons, including a 15-win championship year in 2002 — the steady arm behind the early swagger.

Chad Keyes, RF (2004–2009) — The one that got away, twice over. Came into his power in Atlanta (42 HR in 2006) before the fire sale shipped him out; went on to a 452-home-run career elsewhere — a monument to the franchise's habit of trading its future.

Doug Morris, RHP (2009–2011, 2017–2019) — Homegrown ace whose 18–1, 2.09-ERA masterpiece in 2009 was the last great Atlanta season. Dealt away in the teardown and a Pitcher-of-the-Year winner soon

after — the defining what-if of the Sean era. He came back to the franchise in Durham from 2017 through 2019 and went 10–23 across those three seasons.

Troy Kelso, RHP (2013–2019) — The lone front-line arm of the Durham wilderness. Pitched through pain and peaked with a 6-WAR, 2.50-ERA season in 2015 before, true to franchise form, becoming a star in another uniform.

The crew crossing the river: Vic Perez (36 HR in his 2020 breakout) lit the first spark of the rebuild; **David Betancur** and slick-fielding shortstop **Jim Leach** steadied the climb; and **Juan Martinez** (42 HR, 116 RBI in 2029) and young right-hander **Miguel Zamora** (13–7, 3.05 in 2029) are the names Cincinnati is counting on to chase the Regents' first crown.

Compiled from The Big League franchise records, 2001–2031.